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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 001065

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMERICAN RABBI CONTENDS LITHUANIAN PROPERTY
RESTITUTION NOT KOSHER

REF: VILNIUS 937

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Escalating discord within Lithuania's Jewish community has surpassed the bounds of a religious dispute and threatens to become a fight over community property. At the center of the dispute is Rabbi Sholom Ber Krinsky, an American citizen, who publicly contends that Jewish community leaders refuse him the title of Chief Rabbi in order to exclude him from the process by which Lithuania will reconstitute Jewish communal property. Privately Krinsky told us he faults the USG for supporting what he believes is a "corrupt and nontransparent" restitution process. Krinsky and his supporters have challenged the authority of both the secular Jewish community leader and other rabbis. Vilnius police are investigating allegations that Krinsky disturbed the peace at the synagogue in Vilnius; the synagogue remains closed. We continue to offer Krinsky consular assistance, while we resist Krinsky's efforts to entangle us in his dispute with Lithuania's Jewish community. The USG continues to encourage the GOL to advance the restitution process and we remain confident that the process is transparent and fair. END SUMMARY.

Krinsky: "It's All About Restitution"

2. (SBU) The Jewish Community of Lithuania, under the leadership of chairman Dr. Simonas Alperavicius and in coordination with an international committee of Jewish organizations, has been in protracted negotiations with the GOL to reconstitute former Jewish communal property seized during the Nazi and Soviet occupations of Lithuania. Research on reconstitutable property has slowed the GOL-supported process. Controversy within the Jewish community has now spotlighted the restitution issue as Rabbi Sholom Ber Krinsky, an American citizen who heads the local branch of Chabad Lubavitch, has demanded to be included in the decision making process. Publicly and privately Krinsky, who for most of 2004 has been unsuccessfully battling for recognition as the Chief Rabbi and leader of the Jewish religious community (reftel), now contends that his controversy is in fact about property restitution. Krinsky claims that Alperavicius wants to exclude him from the restitution process, although he (Krinsky) is "the only person who has done anything to advance Jewish religious life in Lithuania during the last ten years." Krinsky argues that he should have a position on the board of the foundation that will make decisions about who benefits from the GOL's restitution of property and claims that he personally should also be a beneficiary of the process.

3. (SBU) The foundation board, as currently envisioned, will comprise six local representatives and six representatives from interested international groups. From Lithuania, we expect the board to include the heads of the three largest religious communities of Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipeda, as well as three prominent members of the national Jewish Community of Lithuania (two from Vilnius and one from Siauliai). Alperavicius will represent the Vilnius religious community. Neither Krinsky nor Rabbi Chaim Burshtein, the country's other resident rabbi (hand-picked by Alperavicius), are Lithuanian citizens, and neither will have seats on the board. Nonetheless, international and local interlocutors have assured us that Krinsky's Chabad Lubavitch will be eligible to receive property, as will all other Jewish institutions in Lithuania.

Righteous Warrior or Criminal?

4. (SBU) Krinsky and his followers have been waging a public campaign against Alperavicius since August 1, distributing anti-Alperavicius literature at many community events and taking out advertisements in local newspapers. Krinsky twice visited the Embassy within the last few weeks, seeking "political" support. During an August 25 meeting at the embassy, he became belligerent (for which he later apologized) and accused the USG of being "party to a crime" for "driving the restitution issue," which he described as "corrupt and nontransparent." (NOTE: We had previously met with Krinsky to discuss property

restitution, among other issues, on March 23. Krinsky, at that time, never expressed concern about the process or plans for disbursing property. END NOTE.)

Criminal Allegations and Investigation

15. (SBU) The MFA notified us by diplomatic note August 27 that Vilnius police are conducting an investigation regarding allegations that Krinsky criminally disturbed the peace in an August 1 incident at the synagogue, and that Krinsky had asked that an Embassy representative participate during his questioning. Krinsky had not informed us of this request during our meetings with him on either August 17 or August 26. A consular representative will attend Krinsky's hearing, although we have made it clear to all parties that this consular official cannot act as a legal representative or advocate. The charge of criminal disturbance of the peace carries a penalty of up to two years imprisonment.

Other Consular Assistance

16. (SBU) Krinsky, his wife, and an associate ran afoul of private security guards who forcibly removed them from the synagogue at the conclusion of a concert on August 25. The following day, Krinsky informed us of his removal. We provided him with lawyers and physicians lists. We also encouraged Krinsky to file a police report if he felt his removal from the synagogue had been unlawful, and to contact us immediately if the police were unwilling to accept such a complaint. Krinsky said that he would likely file a complaint but that he really considered this a political matter and was not at this time seeking consular assistance.

Comment

17. (SBU) The dispute within Lithuania's Jewish community does not appear headed for a rapid conclusion. Attempts at international mediation have failed, and Alperavicius and Krinsky seem ready for a prolonged fight. Krinsky's public activism -- repeatedly confronting his opposition in public fora -- provides fodder for continuing press coverage that often features the Jewish community, and the issue of property restitution, in a negative light. Krinsky's allegations about corruption in the restitution process distort the truth on the ground and hurt the prospects for concluding government work on the matter. While we don't discount the animosity between Alperavicius and Krinsky, the regional diversity of the board and participation of international institutions encourage us to trust that the restitution process will be transparent and fair. Restitution negotiations have essentially stalled until after the October elections. A new Government may be reluctant to tackle this issue if the controversy extends not only to the public, concerned about the cost of restitution and perceived special treatment of one ethnic community, but also to the interested parties.

18. (SBU) Krinsky's American citizenship complicates the issue and the Embassy's role. We will continue to offer consular assistance to Krinsky. Without entering into the middle of a community dispute, we will also continue to encourage transparency and fairness in the restitution process.

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